

# Is "3" the new "B"? Take this crash course in how your child's teacher is measuring his progress.

BY LINDA RODGERS

The first time I opened my daughter's kindergarten report card, I found it filled with I's and V's instead of A's or B's (and, no, I wasn't expecting C's from my little smarty-pants). Then I flipped it over to the comments—and wondered why I was reading a description of what the class was up to when I already knew what was on the agenda. What type of report card was this anyway?

Actually, it was what's known in educator-speak as a "standards-based report card"—and I wasn't the first mom to be mystified by it. Since the No Child Left Behind law was passed, many elementary schools have said bye-bye to letter grades. Instead, they're using numbers or other types of marks to show how well students are picking up specific skills, such as being able to subtract two-digit numbers or read grade-level books.

Why the switch from classic letter grades? That type of grading system tended to compare each student's performance with his classmates', explains Thomas R. Guskey, Ph.D., a professor of educational psychology at the University of Kentucky and the author of *How's My Kid Doing? A Parent's Guide to Grades, Marks, and Report Cards*. "A 'C' just tells you that your child is in the middle of the class; it doesn't tell you what he's learning." Standards-based reports compel teachers to evaluate each student according to state-approved goals of what kids should know at each grade level, says Guskey. "Teachers base their assessment on how well your child is learning the things they think are important." Here's how to decode the new report-card lingo.

## REPORT CARD

### LINCOLN ELEMENTARY

2011-2012 School Year

**GRADE THREE**  
 Student: Jack Jones  
 Teacher: Ms. Culpepper

SPELLING	Score
Knows assigned words	4
Applies spelling strategies	3
Is developing conventional spelling	3
<b>EFFORT</b>	3

  

HANDWRITING	Score
Writes legibly in manuscript	2
Writes legibly in cursive	1
<b>EFFORT</b>	2

## Settling the Score

**4**

*Exceeds Expectations*

**3**

*Meets Expectations*

**2**

*Approaching Expectations*

**1**

*Not Meeting Expectations*

## Making the Grade

The grading "rubric," or assessment tool, used by your school may consist of numbers or of letters that are abbreviations for certain phrases, sometimes with pluses and minuses added on. No matter what type of marks are used, all cards give you a key that explains what they stand for. If your child is getting mostly 4's (or CS's or I's), it means she's working beyond grade level—for instance, your second-grader is able to tell time in five-minute increments when the target is to tell it to the quarter-hour. Or vice versa—she's able to tell time to the hour, and sometimes to the half, but needs more help from you and the teacher to meet the grade requirement. In that case, she'd probably receive a 2 (meaning, slightly below grade level) for the marking period. If she's getting 3's or PW's, she's right on target.

Like me, many moms and dads see a 3 and translate it into a B. But these marks don't really convert to traditional grades. Instead, they're better at showing you

how your child is progressing during the year, says Jennifer Scoggin, a former second-grade teacher in New York City and now an educational consultant. A con? "They're limiting—there's a danger that you'll focus on the benchmarks alone, and think your job is done once your child's hit them," she adds. To get around this (especially if your little learner consistently exceeds expectations): Talk to the teacher about the standards for the next grade level. A good teacher knows the goals not only for her grade but for the ones above and below it so she can keep adding value to your child's education, says Scoggin. For example, if your first-grader is an ace at writing all her letters, upper and lower, and has no problem spacing them, then her teacher may feel she's ready to start learning cursive, a second-grade subject.

## Reading Between the Lines

Most report cards now break down subjects into separate components. This is especially true of language arts, which is